

# 1.0 Introduction: A Call to Action



The Cape Fear River, one of Wilmington's many assets, is currently underutilized.

This Downtown Plan seeks a reunion between downtown Wilmington and the Cape Fear River. Rich in history, the waterfront was once the focal point for life in early Wilmington. Industrialization and its influences on mobility and settlement patterns have since altered that historical relationship between the people of Wilmington and their river. Suburban development continues to compete with downtown's historic center, necessitating the continual redefinition of downtown's purpose.

This Plan focuses on implementation and reclaims the waterfront as the urban foundation for downtown Wilmington's character and identity. By building on past planning efforts, this plan seeks to advance a vision for the future of downtown that renews the connection between the people of Wilmington and their use, understanding, and appreciation of the Cape Fear River waterfront.

Throughout America, there has been a resurgence in the regeneration of cities, much of which centers on the urban waterfront. Seeking an alternative to the homogeneity and inconveniences of the suburbs, people are rediscovering and valuing the order, energy, walkability, and

diversity of people and use that can characterize city life. This renewed appreciation that is fueling a return to the American city has generated an interest in reinventing industrial waterfronts as active and stimulating places for recreation and entertainment. Waterfront redevelopment can help illuminate a city's historical and cultural character, provide a respite from the fast pace of life, and spur economic development. Sensitively designed places that engage people and facilitate their use and enjoyment of the water can enhance the inherent beauty of the urban waterfront and create a unique identity for the City. Wilmington's waterfront downtown has that promise.



# Purpose

The purpose of this Waterfront Downtown Plan is to update the vision that was laid in 1997, for the future of downtown Wilmington over the next 16 years. The primary goal of this plan is to transform Wilmington from an historic downtown that happens to have a waterfront to a *waterfront downtown* that is a destination in itself, vital for living, working, learning, visiting, and playing.

### KEY OBJECTIVES

The key objectives of this Plan include creating a vision framework that:

- *Builds upon previous plans*—In 1997, the City of Wilmington commissioned its first Vision 2020 Plan and has prepared several studies in response to that vision. This Plan synthesizes the existing studies, surveys and reports on the status and recommended solutions for downtown in light of a current analysis.
- *Capitalizes on the city's existing assets*—This Plan uses Wilmington's heritage, architecture, and natural beauty and other strengths to guide solutions for the future. As one of the City's greatest resources, the Cape Fear River is a focus of this Plan.
- *Encourages a mix of uses*—The 1997 Plan recognized the value of diversity in land use—living, working, learning, and playing—as a means to spur economic development. This Plan considers the socio-economic and real estate market conditions related to realizing that goal.

The Plan addresses the use of festivals, events and other attractions as a means to attract people downtown. It also addresses the adequacy of open space for its viability for a variety of programs and activities.

- *Respects the historic fabric and attraction of the waterfront*—The height, scale, mass and quality of detail of new development can all impact existing historic and natural resources. This Plan addresses these issues in relation to the development process, including building height and zoning regulations.
- *Encourages a friendly streetscape environment*—Since successful American cities accommodate many modes of travel, the street network should be easily navigated by pedestrians, bicyclists and automobiles. The streetscape should provide a scale and quality of design that is interesting to the pedestrian, amenities to provide comfort, and adequate signage for locating cultural attractions, historic landmarks, and parking garages. This Plan considers the physical character of streets for their walkability and wayfinding purposes.



Many of Wilmington's streets are attractive and inviting.



People add vitality to a street.



Valuable space along the waterfront is currently used for parking.



A key objective of this plan is to reclaim the waterfront for the people of Wilmington.



## Public Participation

**City Of Wilmington**

Development Services  
Planning Division  
Engineering  
Economic Development Liaison  
Parks, Recreation & Downtown Services  
Central Services, Parking  
Public Services, Utilities  
Community Services, Code Enforcement  
Wilmington Police Department  
Members of City Council

**Downtown Stakeholders**

Wilmington Downtown, Inc.  
Downtown Wilmington Association  
Wilmington Industrial Development  
Tourism Development Authority  
Wilmington Harbor Enhancement Trust  
Cape Fear Community College  
Residents of Old Wilmington  
North Side Community Representatives  
Real Estate Developers

**More than 100 Individual Citizens**

## Planning Process

The development of this Plan has included: (1) an identification of needs based on a review of existing plans and policies, interviews with local citizens, business owners and other stakeholders, and an analysis of existing conditions, including field reconnaissance surveys of the community’s physical fabric; (2) the preparation of potential alternatives for consideration; and (3) the development of broad directives and specific recommendations.

Community input has been central to the planning process. Each phase of the process has been organized around a public meeting to ensure the Plan is well-informed with public sentiment and opinion. The meetings included a kick-off meeting and four subsequent workshops with the public. The kick-off meeting was held in January 2004 with the Steering Committee to review project goals and desired outcomes of the planning process. Members of the Steering Committee included: representatives from the

City of Wilmington’s Planning Division; Parks, Recreation and Downtown Services Department, Economic Development Department, and Central Services Department; and the Executive Director of Wilmington Downtown, Inc.

The first public workshop, held in February 2004, summarized market and land use conditions, perceptions and quality of life concerns, and development opportunities and constraints, and provided an opportunity to receive public input on those conditions. The second workshop, held in March 2004, engaged citizens in the synthesis of three alternative development scenarios into a draft plan. The third workshop, held in May 2004, involved citizens in specific discussions on the draft plan and priority implementation strategies. The fourth public meeting, held in October 2004, was a presentation of the draft report at a joint work session of the Planning Commission and City Council.



Citizens discuss alternatives for Wilmington’s new waterfront downtown during the second public workshop.

# Wilmington: A Historical Perspective

Although explorers had been visiting the region since 1524, settlement of the Cape Fear River did not occur until the early eighteenth century. The City of Wilmington was founded in 1732 as an English colony. It was laid in a gridiron plan, with a market and wharf marking the center of town at the intersection of what is now Market and Front Streets.

Wilmington had a significant role in the Colonial, Revolutionary and Civil War periods. It led the world in the production of naval stores for more than one hundred years, from its inception until after the Civil War. The city’s surrounding pine forests supplied the production of important supplies such as tar, pitch, turpentine and rosin that were important to the British navy during colonial times. During pre-revolutionary times, citizens demonstrated political opposition against the Stamp Act in 1765. During the Revolutionary War, Wilmington troops fought the British at Moore’s Creek. It was occupied by British forces commanded by Major James Henry Craig in 1781. During the Civil War, Wilmington became a major shipbuilding center. It was the last Confederate port to be captured by Union forces when it fell after two major battles.

In addition to its rich political and economic history, Wilmington was also a social and cultural center of activity in its early days. Before the end of the eighteenth century, the Thalian Society was established to promote theatrical performances, and during the mid-eighteenth century the Cape Fear Library Society



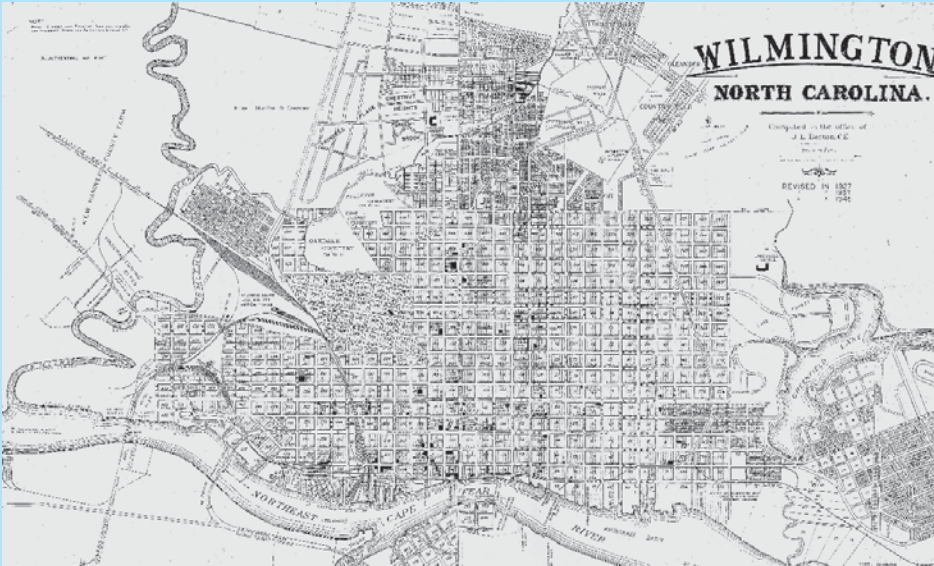
Historic Wilmington ca. 1900, before the automobile became fashionable.  
Source:

was founded. The City also has a rich African American history as it became home to a large number of former slaves who sought employment in various mills at the waterfront. The City was home to North Carolina’s first black attorney, George Mabson, North Carolina’s first black doctor, Dr. James Francis Snober, and the country’s first black professionally trained architect, Robert R. Taylor.

Wilmington experienced great prosperity during the late nineteenth and first half of the twentieth centuries as a railroad town and successful port. Historic maps indicate Wilmington had a fully functioning, mixed-use downtown where people lived, worked, learned, and played. While lumber and cotton mills, tar and turpentine distilleries lined the waterfront west of Water Street, to the east of Water Street

were markets and grocers, clothing and shoe stores, book stores, jewelry stores, a bank, a hardware store, printing and photography stores, a bicycle and repair store, barber shops, drug stores, boarding houses, mariner saloons, a candy and a toy store, a school, city hall and opera house. Conveniently interspersed with all of these uses were many dwellings.

Wilmington was North Carolina’s largest and most important port city until about 1910, when the tobacco and textile towns of the Piedmont area began to grow. It was a leading exporter of cotton until about World War I when the shipbuilding industry sustained the City. Expanding railroad companies again led the City’s growth until World War II. The population of downtown Wilmington peaked with the end of World War II (circa 1945).



Map of Wilmington, ca. 1945.  
Source:

Circumstances changed dramatically when the Atlantic Coast Line Railroad decided to relocate its headquarters to Jacksonville in 1955. The relocation of the railroad, the post-war construction of highways, and the simultaneous exodus of families to the suburbs had a devastating impact on downtown Wilmington. By the middle of the twentieth century, Wilmington had substantially expanded south and east toward the Intercoastal Waterway and the Atlantic Ocean.

The Downtown Area Revitalization Effort (DARE, now known as Wilmington Downtown, Inc.) was established in 1976 to help revitalize downtown through historic preservation, adaptive use, and other initiatives. The historic communities immediately surrounding downtown, inhabited by the Residents of Old Wilmington (ROW), are particularly strong.



## Previous Plans

The City of Wilmington has taken several steps to improve the downtown quality of life and strengthen businesses in the city’s core. The first Vision 2020 Plan, prepared in 1997, encouraged an active, safe, and vibrant mixed-use downtown. The plan included 10 key strategies for realizing this vision. Since the completion of that plan, the City has undertaken various projects and initiatives to help implement these strategies. Several strategies have specific actions underway, while others require further definition for implementation. Table 2-1 describes the 10 strategies identified in the original Vision 2020 Plan, the actions that have been taken to realize those strategies, and additional action items that should be pursued.

	10 Strategies Identified in 1997 Vision 2020 Plan	Action Items Implemented or Underway
1	Encourage the relocation of major industrial and shipping uses out of downtown.	Pharmaceuticals PD recently procured land for a new office complex at the north end of the waterfront.
2	Support an increase in hotel and convention development to secure Wilmington as a business and tourism destination.	Ongoing efforts to provide a new Convention Center along the River, including current negotiations to procure waterfront land for a convention center and hotel site.
3	Coordinate with current and future growth of Cape Fear Community College to create a more cohesive and urban campus.	Ongoing coordination meetings with CFCC, and exchange of land parcels to strengthen campus and redevelop North 3rd Street.
4	Support an increase in residential development downtown, including infill and rehabilitated housing throughout the historic district.	Ongoing support for increasing residential uses downtown, including infill and rehabilitated upper floor apartments/condos and new mixed-use buildings throughout the historic district.
5	Support the extension of the Riverwalk between Homes and Memorial Bridges.	Riverwalk constructed from the Coastline Hotel to Nun Street.
6	Support the development of sufficient parking and innovative forms of transportation.	Three new parking garages have been constructed.
7	Support public spaces for civic activities along the River.	Construction of Riverwalk pocket parks such as at Orange Street.
8	Encourage preservation of historic resources, including the inventory of historic properties and the adoption of design guidelines.	Local historic district boundaries established, and National Register Historic District expanded.
9	Encourage a framework of development guidelines to protect historic quality, charm and urbanity of downtown.	Updated Historic District Design Guidelines, and CBD supplemental design regulations adopted.
10	Encourage a quality environment along the Cape Fear River, including retention of the green west bank.	West bank remains undeveloped but has not been officially designated as open space.

PREVIOUS PLANS CONSULTED FOR VISION 2020 UPDATE
<div><div>Vision 2020 Plan (1997)</div><div>River Corridor Plan (1997)</div><div>Economic Development Study (2003)</div><div>Parks and Recreation Master Plan for the City of Wilmington 2003-2008 (2003)</div><div>Zoning Ordinance (2003)</div><div>Downtown Nightclubs, Downtown Forum and other papers re: nightclub issue (2003)</div><div>Wilmington Urban Area Multi-Modal Transportation Center Feasibility Study (Draft Final 2000)</div><div>Parks and Recreation Plan</div><div>Coastal Area Management Plan</div><div>Riverwalk Plan</div><div>Public Space Task Force Report (2004)</div><div>Downtown Task Force Update (2001)</div><div>Downtown Survey Results (2002)</div><div>Vision 2020 Summit Videos (2002/2003)</div><div>Wilmington Design Guidelines for Historic District (updated 1999)</div><div>The State of the Arts and Cultural Affairs (2003)</div><div>Downtown Parking Facilities Plan</div><div>NorthSide Community Plan (2003)</div><div>Revitalization Plan for 4th Street Business District</div><div>Development Action Plan for 4th Street Business District</div><div>Development Manual and Action Plan for Castle Street Community (1996)</div><div>10-Point Parking Plan (2002)</div><div>Dawson/Wooster Thoroughfare Land Use (1989)</div><div>Water &amp; Sewer Capacity and Condition Studies</div><div>Solid Waste Procedures</div><div>Proposed UDO Stormwater Ordinance Revisions (2002)</div><div>Wilmington Downtown, Inc Market Report and Downtown Development Marketing Plan (2004)</div><div>Wilmington Downtown, Inc Strategic Plan (undated)</div></div>

# Why Cities Are Important

There has been a resurgence in the regeneration of cities, especially waterfront cities, across the country. People are recognizing the importance of cities as historical and cultural centers. Unlike the suburbs, cities are usually more compact and ordered, more walkable and interesting, and more diverse in people and in use. Cities help illuminate history and civilization. As part of this shift in American thinking about the benefits of city life, there is also a new appreciation for the inherent beauty and unique identity of the urban waterfront.

Throughout history, cities have been important because they manifest the historical, social, political and economic culture that is unique to a physical place. Their urban form, architectural quality and character convey a sense of a community’s heritage and ideals. Cities are places that can be experienced and re-experienced by the resident, the tourist, the young and the old. Cities are cultural artifacts of time and place, bringing awareness to where we come from and where we’re going.

Cities that pre-date the automobile were designed on a grid to be compact and dense. The density, or closeness of buildings, creates a greater sense of order in the city than in the suburbs. The city’s infrastructure encourages

walking as a primary means of mobility, and the proximity of people facilitates social discourse. The historic association of cities with commerce, government, education, and the arts helps generate a diverse mix of uses, creating a vitality and civic identity that is not found in the suburbs. People from all backgrounds tend to inhabit and visit cities because worldwide they are viewed as places of culture and expression, where differences are valued.

An urban waterfront is often a region’s most valuable but unrealized asset. Most cities were settled along major waterways as a means for travel, economic sustenance and fortification. Before the advent of the automobile, the waterfront was often the front door to the American city. Early port cities like Wilmington were points of arrival for people and goods. Since other modes of mobility were limited, waterfronts also became the urban center for commercial activity and social exchange. The town market, a central meeting place, was often located close to wharfs to avoid moving heavy produce long distances. Today, cities are rediscovering and reclaiming their waterfronts as places for recreation and entertainment, leisure and respite. As urban destinations, they also have great potential to spur economic development.



An urban waterfront should provide generous space for walking and public activities.



Livable streets are a hub of activity for residents, employees, and students.



Suburbs lack the historical and aesthetic features inherent in downtowns.



A continuous and expansive riverwalk is a great public attraction.